

## Heine's Judaism

A man doomed never to belong . . . The curse that had fallen on him in the cradle ; he could not *belong*.

LEWIS BROWNE, on Heine

SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER HIS CONVERSION TO LUTHERANISM IN JUNE 1825, Heine wrote to a friend: "Is it not foolish: hardly am I baptized, when I am decried as a Jew?"

Had he been born a hundred years earlier he could have slipped quietly into the mainstream of a Christian world that made no distinction as to race or nationality amongst people who had accepted the tenets of Christendom. In the eighteenth century, even a professing Jew (like Moses Mendelssohn) might be welcomed into the ranks of the intelligentsia. For this was the era of humanism and universalism highlighted by Kant, Lessing, Wieland, and their counterparts outside Germany. Lessing and Mendelssohn were close friends. The poet Wieland strongly doubted the possibility of German nationhood, and even dreaded the idea for fear that such a nation would eradicate liberty and intellectual life in Germany. To the philosopher Kant, Germany appeared as *das Land der Weltbuerger*, the country of cosmopolitans, whose task it was "to gather the good of all nations and to harmonize it, and to accept all of them equally willingly."

About the time of Heine's birth (1797), religious discrimination was on the wane, anti-Semitism in the racial sense did not exist and the term itself was not to be coined before the 1870's. Nevertheless, the nineteenth century was to be the age of an aggressive nationalism. In 1819 Hartwig Hundt, in his *Judenspiegel*, advocated that Jewish men should be castrated, Jewish women placed in houses of prostitution, and Jewish children sold to planters in the West Indies to take the place of colored slaves. University professors, in a frenzy of Teutonic enthusiasm, voiced opinions foreshadowing the ruthless Judeophobia of Rosenberg and Streicher. In the same year pogroms erupted throughout Franconia. A decade



later synagogues as well as Jewish-owned shops and homes were raided by mobs in the enlightened and liberal city of Hamburg, where Heine's uncle, the famous banker Salomon Heine was living.

It is not likely that Heine would ever have been stirred by Jewish nationalist feelings had it not been that the outside world forced upon him the concept of the *nie abzuwaschende Jude*, the Jew who cannot wash away his Jewishness with baptismal water. Even if religion had played a more important role in the Heine household at Duesseldorf, it is unlikely that an individual as skeptical as Heine would have accepted Judaism without question. Had not German nationalism, in the process of severing its link with the humanism of old, introduced a "racialism" that ignored baptismal certificates, Heine might have lingered in its camp a little longer than he actually did; in the end, however, his searching and critical mind would inevitably have rejected the narrowness and bigotry of the Teutonic world. For any kind of nationalism was as repugnant to Heine as it was to his fellow-expatriate and rival, Ludwig Boerne, who wrote: "*Ich hasse jede Gesellschaft, die kleiner ist als die menschliche*" (I hate every kind of society smaller than humanity).

But Heine, unlike the very rational Boerne, could be impressed by non-rational factors at the peril of his sound judgment. As a student, he succumbed to the lure of the German *Burschenschaften*, seduced by their flamboyant talk about an ideal "Holy German Empire" that would replace the weak and disunited post-Napoleonic Germany. He joined a fraternity, got mixed up in jingoistic activities, and seriously subscribed, as some of his early poems indicate, to the ardent nationalism that inflamed German academic youth. But disillusionment came to the son of Samson Heine when he realized that the *Burschenschaften* were basically reactionary and anti-Jewish, and that his interest in German culture was shared by few. At Goettingen, for instance, he was one of a handful of students attending the lectures on Old German: "There are only nine who care about the language, the mind, and the spirit of their forefathers!"

His early enthusiasm for everything German, for the pageantry, poetry, and folklore of the Middle Ages, soon turned to a revulsion



which found its expression in a strongly worded letter (April, 1822) to a friend, Christian Sethe: "Everything German is odious to me, and unfortunately you are a German. Everything German affects me like an emetic. The German language rends my ears. At times my own poems nauseate me, when I see they are written in German." And he added in French a wild attack on the Germans, "*une race si ennuyante et malicieuse*," expressing the wish to go to Arabia to compose Arabic poetry.

The break with German nationalism left him temporarily without a cause—he who always needed a cause to champion, though never whole-heartedly and never for long. After a while, in the *Verein fuer Kultur und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, newly formed in Berlin by a band of young intellectuals, Heine, the secular Jew, believed he had found exactly what he wanted.

The purpose of this learned society, as Heine put it later (in an essay on Ludwig Marcus, 1844), was "none other than the adjustment of historic Judaism to modern science." Heine did not, as Louis Untermeyer claims, contribute to the society's journal, *Zeitschrift fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. But for a short time he was its recording secretary, and he taught Jewish history three hours weekly to boys at the school established by the *Verein*.

By the time he became a member, in August, 1822, the poet already had finished his play in blank verse, *Almansor*. This is not one of his outstanding works, but one of considerable biographical interest, for it reveals, under thin disguise, sympathy with his fellow-Jews and fury with their oppressors. *Almansor*, the brave young Moorish prince, who, with his girl in his arms, leaps to his death to avoid surrender to the Spanish knights, is Heine as he fancied himself. The cruel Spaniards obviously represent the German nationalists.

If Spaniards and Moors used swords to decide whether Christianity or Islam was superior, most of the ideological battles in the last century were fought with pen and ink, and the *Verein*, indeed, used up quantities of both. Heine's role in the *Verein* has been exaggerated by some of his biographers. Since he left Berlin in May, 1823, his active participation was limited to a period of less



than ten months. It is true that for many years thereafter he continued to correspond with fellow-members, but that was all ; anyway, the *Verein* itself disintegrated in 1824. The poet did profit greatly from his contacts with such scholarly men as Ludwig Marcus and Leopold Zunz, and several important poems, as well as *The Rabbi of Bacherach*, would not have been written but for Heine's experience as a member of the *Verein*.

But the only major work Heine actually finished in the *Verein* period of an essay, *Ueber Polen*, the fruit of a journey he made through Posen, a part of Poland annexed by Prussia. About one-tenth of the essay deals with the local Jews. Reared among Jews who in dress, speech, and thinking could in no way be distinguished from their Gentile neighbors, Heine for the first time encountered Jews of a different kind :

The social position of the Jews in Poland is somewhere between the peasant and the nobleman. They compose more than a quarter of the population and are engaged in all the trades and, therefore, entitled to be called the third estate of Poland . . . .

In the part of Poland that now belongs to Prussia, no Jew can obtain employment by the state, unless he permits himself to be baptized ; in the Russian part of Poland, on the contrary, the Jews are admitted to all public offices because that is deemed expedient . . . .

It would be desirable for our government to try to inspire the Jew of the Grand Duchy [i.e., Posen] with more love for agriculture, as there are said to be few Jewish farmers. There are many of them in Russian Poland. The Polish Jew is supposed to have acquired his dislike for the plough while witnessing the wretched state of the serfs. As soon as the humiliating status of the peasant will have been abolished, the Jew also will reach for the plough . . . .

With few exceptions all the taverns in Poland are in the hands of the Jews, and their many liquor distilleries do much harm to the country, as they tempt the peasant to debauchery. But the drinking of alcohol is necessary to the peasant's happiness . . . .

Every nobleman has a Jew in the village or in the town whom he calls "Faktor" and who handles all his commissions, does his buying and selling, provides him with information and so on. A peculiar



institution, fully demonstrating the indolence of the Polish nobleman . . . .

The exterior of the Polish Jew is horrible. I shudder when I recall the impression I had when, for the first time I saw a Polish village, chiefly inhabited by Jews . . . . Yet this aversion soon gave way to pity when I observed more closely the state of these people and noticed their sheds, which look like pigsties, where they live, pray, bargain and—suffer. Their language is a German mixed with Hebrew and modeled after the Polish. In previous times they had fled persecution in Germany because in religious matters Poland has always distinguished herself by her tolerance . . . . The Jews were the first to bring craftsmanship and trade to Poland and were favored by Casimir the Great with important privileges. They seem to have been nearer to the nobility than to the peasantry ; for according to an old law a Jew, by the mere fact of conversion to Christianity, was raised to the nobility. I do not know if and why this law has fallen into oblivion.

In these early days, however, the Jews were certainly much superior in culture and mental equipment to the noblemen, who were skilled only in the art of fighting and still lacked French refinements. The Jews at least were interested in their Hebrew scholarly and religious books, for the sake of which they have left their homeland and the comforts of life. But apparently they have not kept pace with the advancement of European culture, and their spiritual world has sunk into an unpleasant superstition which a hair-splitting scholasticism has molded into thousands of queer shapes . . . . Still, despite the barbarian fur cap which covers his head, and the even more barbarian ideas that fill it, I prefer the Polish Jew, smelling of garlic, with his dirty fur coat, his beard, and his queer speech, to many a German Jew in all the glory of his government bonds.

It was through the *Verein* that Heine learned of Mordecai Manuel Noah's fantastic plan to found a Jewish state on Grand Island in the Niagara River ; by a letter, dated January 1, 1822, this society had notified Major Noah of his election as honorary member. But Heine's references to Noah were written after his connection with the *Verein* had become merely theoretical and his enthusiasm for a renaissance of Jewish culture and for Jewish nationalism was already waning. From Lueneburg he wrote mockingly to his friend Moses Moser in Berlin (May, 1823):



When, some day, Ganstown [Eduard Gans was vice-president of the *Verein*] is built and a happier generation will *bensh lulav* and chew *matzoth* on the Mississippi [he meant Niagara], and a new Jewish literature starts to flourish—then our present commercial slang will be a part of the poetic language, and little Marcus' lyrical grandson will sing, in *tallit* and *teffilin*, before the whole *kehillah* of Ganstown: They sat by the waters of the Spree [the river flowing through Berlin] and counted treasury-bills, when there their enemies came and demanded: Deliver unto us your London bills—high is their rate of exchange!

In a letter of April 23, 1826, Heine sarcastically referred to the debacle of Noah's grandiose scheme. He told Moser of a dream in which he saw Noah performing the miracle of silencing the loquacious Gans. Writing to Leopold Zung (May, 1826), he asked his friend, ironically, to place a volume of his (Heine's) latest book in the library of the long-defunct *Verein*, or, should the library have been transferred to Ararat, to place the same book in Frau Zunz' kitchen.

Heine was obviously disappointed in the *Verein*, whose goals were both unclear and unrealistic, whose leadership was — notwithstanding the gifts of a Zunz, Gans, Moser, and Marcus — incompetent, and whose program lacked support. Zunz and Gans, president and vice-president, outspokenly criticized their indifferent co-religionists. Seeing the *Verein* swamped by material difficulties because the wealthy Jews refused to give any help, Gans declared in a report: "The only link which unites the Jews is that of fear; the only higher interest for which they are willing to part with some portion of their worldly goods is that of charity."

Zunz found the German Jews to be "adrift and without discipline or principles, turning to Christianity because they have nothing else to turn to: one section still sunk in the squalor of past ages, despised by Europe, another rustling papers in minor Government offices, rich or bankrupt, persecuted or tolerated in turn." Heine did not fit this description, yet he, too, lacked the strength of conviction. His identification with the Jewish group was (like that of Disraeli, who became a member of the Church of England) a matter of pride, not of religious affiliation. Besides, Heine's deter-



mination to endure the fate of a Jew surrounded by hostile Christians often wavered. Here are a few excerpts from letters sent to relatives and friends after his departure from Berlin:

To Immanuel Wohlwill (April 1, 1823): "I do not have the courage to wear the traditional beard, to hear myself called 'dirty Jew,' to fast, etc."

To Moritz Embden (May 3, 1823): "My attachment to Judaism has its roots solely in a profound antipathy to Christianity. I who have no use for any dogmatic religion, shall perhaps one day become converted to the most orthodox rabbinism, because I consider it a good antidote."

To Moses Moser (August 23, 1823): "I have rid you of the illusion that I was enthusiastic about the Jewish religion. I admit that I shall never cease to bestir myself on behalf of the rights of Jews to equal citizenship, and when troublous times come, as I feel sure they will come, from their drinking-halls to their palaces, the German mob will hear my voice resound."

Once more to Moser (January 9, 1824): "You give me no news about the *Verein*. If you think the cause of our brethren is not as close to my heart as it used to be you are much mistaken. 'May my right hand wither, if I forget thee, Yerusholayim.' "

To the same (June 25, 1824): "I am studying the chronicles thoroughly and especially much *historia judaica*, the latter on account of its connection with the Rabbi [*The Rabbi of Bacherach*] and perhaps, also, from inner necessity. As I turn the pages of those sad annals, very strange feelings pervade me, an abundance of instruction and suffering. The spirit of Jewish history reveals itself to me ever more gradually, and this spiritual armor will certainly be of assistance to me later."

But this "spiritual armor" proved to be of no help in Heine's struggle for physical survival. Conversion to Lutheranism did not improve matters, either. In July, 1826, only a year after the baptism, Heine confessed to Moser his desire to say farewell to the German fatherland. His endeavors to find himself any position that would guarantee him a regular income, be it that of an editor, a college professor, or even a town clerk in Hamburg, were all in



vain ; nor could he live on the royalties received on his books, and he was loath to depend on his rich uncle's charity. Hence, the news of the July Revolution in France stirred him with enthusiasm, and when, in 1831, he moved to Paris for good, his decision to settle in France was prompted as much by the wish to live under what seemed to him a liberal, progressive regime as by the prospect of leaving behind the *nie abzuwaschende Jude*.

In Paris Heine was extremely happy, relishing the courtesy and respect of the Parisians, who treated him as a distinguished foreigner, so happy that he wrote to a friend in Germany: "If anyone asks you how I feel, tell him, 'Like a fish in water,' or rather, tell people that when one fish in the sea asks another how he feels, the reply is, 'Like Heine in Paris.'"

He felt himself to be neither a German nor a Jew, but a cosmopolite whose task it was to work for a reconciliation of those great nations, the French and the German, whose hostility had already sparked many conflagrations. His second task—as important as the first—was to work for the emancipation of mankind. As he formulated it as early as 1828: "not simply the emancipation of the Irish, the Greeks, Frankfurt Jews, West Indian blacks, and all such oppressed people, but the emancipation of the whole world, and especially of Europe, which has now come of age, and is tearing itself loose from the apron-strings of the privileged classes, the aristocracy" (*Journey from Munich to Genoa*.)

In his principal works of that period—*French Affairs*, the three volumes of *The Salon*, his contributions to the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*—there are only occasional references to Jews and Judaism (for instance, in the wonderful pen portraits of Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn). Elsewhere there are beautiful passages on Shylock and on the Bible. In the memorial to Ludwig Marcus the poet recalled the optimistic days of fight, twenty years before, when both he and the little hunchbacked scholar firmly believed in the mission of the *Verein*. While acknowledging the pure intentions, the glorious idealism of the membership, Heine could not, in retrospect, conceal his opinion that the Society's goals had from the beginning been much too limited, that anyone working for it



could not go beyond "searching the battlefields of the past for the bones of the champion that had preceded him."

This first Parisian period produced also the third and final chapter of *The Rabbi of Bacherach*. We have only to compare the first two chapters, written in 1825 by the erstwhile member of the *Verein*, with Chapter Three, added a decade and a half later, to see that the sentimental naïveté is entirely gone. The romantic poetry of the fragment's early parts was written in the hope that, as the poet told his confidant Moser, the finished novel would be "an immortal book, an eternal lamp in God's cathedral." In fact, the farcical third chapter has nothing in common with the tender legend of medieval persecution and flight. The Spanish Cavalier who talks so facetiously to Rabbi Abraham and his beautiful wife Sarah is nobody but the nineteenth century mocker, Henri Heine of Paris: "Thou hast never loved us, Don Isaac," Rabbi Abraham reproached the Marrano.

"Well," replied the Spaniard, "I like your cookery much better than your creed—which wants the right sauce. I really never could rightly digest you . . . . Yes, I am a heathen, and the melancholy self-tormenting Nazarenes are quite as little to my taste as the dry and joyless Hebrews. But . . . do not look at me with disdain. My nose is not a renegade. When I once by chance came at dinnertime into this street, and the well-known savory odors of the Jewish kitchen rose to my nose, I was seized by the same yearning which our fathers felt for the fleshpots of Egypt, pleasant-tasting memories of youth came unto me."

And this continues for several pages, until the reader is relieved by the final statement: "The conclusion and the chapters which follow are lost, not from any fault of the author."

Yet, when the occasion required seriousness, Heine, the jocular, the vain and irreverent "Don Isaac," was adept at transforming his light pen into a sharp sword. Such an occasion offered itself in the year 1840. In February of that year, in far-away Damascus, a Capuchin friar suddenly disappeared, whereupon the Capuchins spread the rumor that the local Jews had slain him in order to use his blood in *matzoth*. In the course of an investigation undertaken



by the Turkish Governor, many Jews were thrown into jail and tortured there, and some never came out alive. Only through the intervention of Austria and England, and through the efforts of such Jewish leaders as Isaac Adolphe Cremieux and Moses Montefiore, was the Governor finally compelled to release the surviving Jewish prisoners and put an end to the outrageous investigation.

Since France was divided over the Damascus Affair almost as it was to be, more than fifty years later, over the Dreyfus Case, the reports Heine sent from Paris to the *Allgemeine Zeitung* of Augsburg are of considerable historical interest. Though written from the standpoint of a liberal, unprejudiced Christian (Heine speaks of "our Christian brothers"), these newspaper articles reveal the Jew in Heine. One recalls Theodor Herzl's dispatches about the trial of Captain Dreyfus to the *Neue Freie Presse*, though Heine's anger was more marked, his language even less bridled by reason. Among other things, Heine wrote with irony about certain German papers which exaggerated the interest taken by French Jewry in the cruel fate of their religionists in Damascus:

In fact, we would rather praise than blame the Jews of Paris *if* they, as the North German journals like to put it, showed such great zeal and pity for their unfortunate brothers in the faith of Damascus, and shunned no pecuniary sacrifice for the honorable rescue of their slandered religion. But such is not the case . . . .

The interest which the Jews here take in the tragedy of Damascus reduces itself to very minute manifestations. The Israelitic Consistorium assembled and deliberated in the lukewarm fashion of all such bodies, and the only result of its deliberations was the opinion that the legal documents of the trial should be published . . . .

One of the most highly prized members of the religious community here . . . would not give a hundred francs should any one ask him to contribute to a fund for rescuing his great race. It is an old, a lamentable, and yet not a worn-out discovery, that the meanest and most sordid motives are ascribed to every one who raises his voice in vindication of the Jews; but I do not believe that Israel ever gave money, save when its teeth were drawn by force . . . .

In his morning audience M. Thiers [the French Premier] assures his hearers with the air of deepest conviction that it is perfectly settled



that the Jews drank Christian blood at the Passover feast, *chacun à son gout*; all the reports of witnesses confirm the fact that the Rabbis of Damascus butchered Pater Thomas and drank his blood . . . in which we could behold a sad superstition, a religious fanaticism which still prevails in the East, while the Jews of the West have become much more humane and enlightened . . . as, for instance, M. de Rothschild who, it is true, has not gone over to the Christian Church, but all the more zealously to the Christian kitchen . . . .

The old system of extirpating races is gradually becoming extinct in the East, through European influence. The right of individuals to exist is also receiving there a higher recognition, and the cruelties of torture are slowly vanishing before a milder system of criminal jurisprudence. The bloody story of Damascus will conduce to this result; and in reference to this, the journey of M. Cremieux to Alexandria [to see Mehemet Ali, ruler of Egypt and suzerain of Syria] is one of the most important events in the annals of humanity.

Yet while he loathed the idea of people being wronged solely because they belonged to a particular national (or religious) group, Heine did not permit his abhorrence of what now is called "genocide" to turn him into a protagonist of nationalism either. He made it clear that it does not suit a poet to play the part of a nationalist, that the poet is by nature a cosmopolite. When, in 1835, his picture was included in an anthology, *Galerie der ausgezeichnetsten Israeliten aller Jahrhunderte*, Heine, in a Parisian paper, announced that this was a mistake, since he belonged to the Lutheran faith. (Simultaneously, Gabriel Riesser, the great champion of Jewish emancipation, deplored the inclusion of the picture of this convert to Christianity.)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The novelist Berthold Auerbach also felt that Heine was a burden rather than a boon for the Jews. Heine found, however, a staunch defender in the historian Heinrich Graetz. Jewish nationalists are divided on the question whether Heine's poems can be included in Jewish national literature. Ahad Ha'am refused to include him because he wrote in German: "The national literature of any nation is only that which is written in its own language." In 1956 a square at Haifa, Israel, was named after the poet, against the frantic opposition of the religious groups who held his "conversion" against him. A new Hebrew translation of "Princess Sabbath" could not be published in Israel: the editor did not wish to risk offending the Hebrew reader by offering him a poem in which the Almighty conveys to Moses on Mount Sinai, along with the Ten Commandments, the art of cooking *tchalent*.



Notwithstanding the cosmopolitanism of the mature Heine, and whatever his religious belief, or lack of it, may have been, however many nasty jabs he took at the Jews, the man who could give us such a glowing description of the Passover celebration (in *The Rabbi of Bacherach*) or of the Sabbath glory (in "Princess Sabbath"), the man who created one of the tenderest portraits of a humble Jewish peddler (Moses Lump, in *The Baths of Lucca*), did have an affinity to the people from whom he sprang. It is often held that it took a horrible illness to bring Heine back to his brethren, to lead him to refer to himself as a "poor Jew, sick to death" (as he did in 1849). This is erroneous. One can trace a direct line from the passage in *Ludwig Boerne, eine Denkschrift* (1840), referring to the Jews as "the dough from which gods are kneaded," to that statement in *Gestaendnisse* (1854), extolling the Bible and Moses, the greatest artist of all times. Here the moribund author declared himself proud "that his ancestors came of the noble house of Israel," and that he was "a descendant of the martyrs who gave a god and a moral code to the world, and who have fought and suffered on every battlefield of thought."<sup>2</sup>

It was not lack of reverence for the Eternal Power that made the invalid of the Rue d'Amsterdam say to the faithful Alfred

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<sup>2</sup> Of Heine's numerous biographers, Max Brod is most concerned with what he considers to be the Jewish aspects in Heine's life and work. Undoubtedly, George Eliot exaggerated and over-simplified when she said: "Heine and his ancestors spent their youth in German air, and were reared on Wurst and Sauerkraut, so that he is as much German as a pheasant is an English bird, or a potato an Irish vegetable." But it is also hard to prove that, as Max Brod sees it, Heine presents "Jewish Spirit working in an alien material."

I, for one, cannot notice any "sound Jewish instincts" nor discover any "manly Jewish bearing" in Heine who had very little Jewish knowledge, and was encouraged rather than dissuaded by his family to embrace Christianity to adapt himself to the prevailing winds. His political enemies often unfairly pointed at what they considered loathsome "Jewish" traits in his make-up. But Heine viewed himself as a German even after his "return" to his ancestral faith. Only once did he refer to himself as a Jewish poet, and this in bitter jest. But he was not joking when, in a moment of justified pride, he exclaimed:

I am a German poet,  
In Germany I'm famed:  
When the best names are mentioned,  
My name is also named.



Meissner that if he were once again well enough to walk without crutches he would go not to a church but straight to the nearest dance hall. It was reverence for life, cruel, egotistical, pleasure-seeking, unprincipled as it might be, that made him speak thus. His temple was the world, his nation was mankind. "It would be in bad taste and petty of me," he explained to Meissner, "ever to be ashamed—as my slanderers have accused me—of being a Jew, but it would be equally ridiculous to claim that I am one." When Heine asserted that in his writings he had, time and again, defended the Jews, this was not an empty boast but the full truth. Still, "I could never immolate myself completely for their sake, like Herr Riesser and some others. I can lose myself in no party, neither Republican nor Patriot, Christian nor Jew."